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ABSTRACT

This study sought to: (1) investigate the degree to which course content on elder abuse and neglect is a part of higher education curriculums in aging; (2) determine which specific elder abuse and neglect course content is included in required and elective coursework; and (3) describe the attitudes of instructors toward including elder abuse and neglect course content in the overall curriculum. Completed questionnaires were received from 211 contact persons representing gerontology instructional programs that are members of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education. The responses indicated that about 30 percent of all undergraduate courses and 40 percent of graduate courses offered included content on aging. Of those courses, only a small percentage included course content on elder abuse and neglect. The results indicate, however, that many programs provide students with the opportunity to attend classes in other instructional areas that cover elder abuse and neglect topics, although few require students to attend such classes. The majority of respondents felt that other problems facing the elderly, such as the unavailability of affordable long-term care, deteriorating physical and mental health, and poverty, were more serious than elder abuse and neglect. (MDM)

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**ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT CONTENT
IN HIGHER EDUCATION
PROGRAMS ON AGING**

Prepared for
United States Administration on Aging (AoA)

September, 1992

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were to: 1) investigate the degree to which elder abuse and neglect course content is a part of higher education curriculums in aging; 2) determine which specific elder abuse and neglect course content is or is not included in required and elective coursework; and 3) describe the attitudes of instructors toward including elder abuse and neglect course content in the overall curriculum. Questionnaires were sent to 319 contact persons representing gerontology instructional programs that are members of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education. Usable questionnaires were received from 211 colleges and universities, for a response rate of 65%.

Generally, a little over one-quarter of all courses offered within the undergraduate instructional units include content on aging. A little over one-third of all courses offered within the graduate instructional units include content on aging. Of those courses, an extremely small number include course content on elder abuse and neglect.

However, a student's educational program includes both courses offered within the student's own instructional unit and courses that are part of the program's curriculum, but offered in other instructional units across the campus. Thus, even though previous results indicated that any one instructional unit offers very few courses that include elder abuse and neglect as a content area, a student's major curriculum may still include wide exposure to elder abuse and neglect course content. Results indicate that many programs provide students with the opportunity to attend classes that cover elder abuse and neglect topics, but very few require students to attend such classes. Approximately 95% of the undergraduate and graduate curriculums include no required courses with primary content in elder abuse and neglect.

However, 76% of the undergraduate curriculums and 68% of the graduate curriculums include elective courses with elder abuse and neglect as a segment or component of the course content.

Respondents were given a list of 20 topic areas in elder abuse and neglect, and asked whether each topic was covered in required courses, elective courses, courses of both types, or not covered in any courses in their curriculums. Those topics included most frequently in courses with aging content were types of abuse, and causal factors of abuse and neglect. At least half of the respondents noted that cultural/ethnic characteristics that could affect service needs and delivery of services to vulnerable older adults, and case assessment were topics not included in any course in their curriculums. A relatively high percentage of respondents indicated that such basic, but extremely important, information as victim and abuser profiles were also not covered in any course. Information about self-neglect, which comprises the largest caseload of adult protective services personnel in most states, was not included in any course with aging content in almost 40% of all curriculums. In general, it seems as if the information that, if known, would impact most positively upon the effectiveness and efficacy of service delivery to abused and neglected elders were the topics that are most frequently not included in students' educational programs.

Confirming the small role that elder abuse and neglect topic areas play in curriculums with aging content, more than 50% of the respondents noted that elder abuse and neglect comprise less than 5% of the total content area in their undergraduate and graduate programs. There was general satisfaction with this distribution of course content. This may be because elder abuse and neglect was viewed as the least serious of four problems facing the elderly today. Compared with the unavailability of affordable long-term care, deteriorating physical and/or mental health,

and poverty, only 5% of the respondents believed that elder abuse and neglect was the most pressing problem. It seems logical to propose that those topics seen as more damaging to the elderly's quality of life will have more emphasis in curriculums established to train future human service professionals. Thus, it would seem unlikely that more attention will be paid to topics in elder abuse and neglect within aging curriculums.

ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT CONTENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS ON AGING

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The growth in gerontology programs in institutions of higher education has been relatively rapid, compared to other academic programs of instruction. Prior to the Older Americans Act of 1965, isolated courses on the aging process existed, but there were no gerontology degree programs (Peterson, 1986). Since the first two formal gerontology degree programs at the University level began in 1967, growth at the Community College, University, and Professional School levels has been documented in various surveys of institutions of higher education (Phillipson, 1989; Peterson, 1986; Donahue, 1960; Bolton, Eden, Holcomb, et.al., 1978). Peterson (1986) estimates that there has been more than a 1500% growth in the number of campuses offering at least one credit course in gerontology between 1957 and the mid-1980's. These courses are found in a variety of academic departments and disciplines, including but not limited to medicine, nutrition and dietetics, family relations, psychology, sociology, dentistry, social work, and nursing. This reflects the reality that a wide variety of generalist fields in the health and human services train students for professions in which the elderly are and will continue to be a significant part of the clientele.

Training to Serve an Aging Population

With such a variety of disciplines, there is not, and cannot be, a prescribed curriculum for gerontology training. However, as the national population ages, it becomes apparent that professionals in all areas of human services will need to increase their knowledge of, and

familiarity with, the problems and situations of older adults. Denton (1990) points out that, for example, "We need pharmacists who are alert to the potential for harmful drug interactions in older adults, and dieticians who understand the nutritional needs unique to aging, whether or not they specialize in serving the older population (p. vi)."

One of the more pressing societal problems facing older adults, and therefore the professional community serving older adults, is the growing national incidence of elder abuse and neglect (Tatara, 1990; Subcommittee on Health and Long-Term Care, 1990). Professionals within Adult Protective Services have traditionally been charged with the responsibility of investigating allegations of abuse and neglect and, if warranted, administering alternative reliefs. State voluntary and mandatory reporting laws have charged many other professionals, such as physicians, nurses, and bankers, with the responsibility of reporting suspected abuse and neglect of older adults to the proper authorities. Model programs consistently find that developing multidisciplinary teams of various professionals in fields such as adult protective services, law enforcement, health care, psychology, etc. are extremely effective in helping both the victims and perpetrators of elder abuse and neglect. Given the above, it would seem that the education of future health and human service professionals in programs of gerontology should include, at least minimally, content areas on elder abuse and neglect.

Objectives of this Study

There is no research that investigates the extent to which specific course content on elder abuse and neglect is incorporated into programs in higher education. This study seeks to: 1) investigate the degree to which elder abuse and neglect course content is a part of higher

education curriculums in aging; 2) determine which specific elder abuse and neglect course content is or is not included in required and elective coursework; and 3) describe the attitudes of instructors toward including elder abuse and neglect course content in the overall curriculum.

METHOD

The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) maintains the only regularly published listing of gerontology instructional programs (Peterson, 1986). Programs are listed by school name, education level, areas of discipline and contact persons at each institution. Its current membership numbers 337 colleges and universities. Questionnaires were sent to 319 contact persons, representing the member gerontology instructional programs (18 instructional contact persons were eliminated, either because of duplicate listings or they represented foreign universities). Contact persons, in an accompanying letter, were asked to give the questionnaire to someone else on the campus if that other person were better qualified to respond, or if that campus included more than one gerontological/aging program. This resulted in an addition of eight contact persons to the sample. A follow-up letter was sent, two months later, to those contact persons who had not yet completed the questionnaire. Useable questionnaires were received from 211 colleges and universities, for a response rate of 65%.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Colleges, universities and graduate professional schools (such as schools of medicine, pharmacy, and seminaries) were included in this study (Table 1). Over half (119) of the respondent institutions were universities. Nearly one-quarter (49) identified themselves as 4 year

colleges. Twenty-nine professional schools responded, as did 14 two-year colleges. Of these, 66% were public education institutions and 34% were private education institutions.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Institutions of Higher Education

Type of Educational Institution	Percent
Two-year College	6.6
Four-year College	23.2
University	56.4
Professional School	13.7

DEPARTMENT OR UNIT CHARACTERISTICS

Educational institutions, of course, are comprised of many types of units. These units may be departments, colleges, centers, etc. In this study, the terms "Department" and "Unit" refer to the smallest administrative unit in which the respondent and/or aging program are a part. Usually, this is an academic department. In some cases, this might be the entire institution.

Of those specifying their administrative unit as an academic department, twice as many respondents placed themselves within a Department of Gerontology/Geriatrics than any other type of department. The next largest specified department or unit was Nursing, closely followed by Sociology. Departments of Family/Child Development, Social Work, Psychology, Education and Medicine were all represented by nearly equal but relatively small numbers of respondents. A large proportion of respondents (26%) grouped themselves into an "Other" category, representing a number of different units not counted above. Generally, these units were larger than single departments, representing aging programs that are a part of an entire Graduate

College, College of Social Sciences and/or Interdisciplinary programs that cut across a number of academic departments and/or colleges (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Types of Academic Departments or Units

Academic Department or Unit	Percent
Gerontology/Geriatrics	28.0
Nursing	12.6
Sociology	11.6
Medicine	4.3
Psychology	4.3
Social Work	4.3
Family/Child Development	3.9
Education	2.4
Home Economics	1.4
Public Administration/Policy	1.0
Other	26.1

Degrees. Both undergraduate and graduate degrees were awarded in nearly 45% of the individual departments or units . Only graduate degrees were given in 20% of the departments or units and 36% awarded only undergraduate degrees.

Student Enrollment. Student enrollment varied widely. Fifty percent of the departments/units reported that they had 50 or less undergraduate majors. On the other hand, over one-quarter of the departments/units served more than 200 undergraduate majors (Table 3). Nearly 50% of the departments/units had 20 or less graduate student majors (Table 4).

TABLE 3. Undergraduate Majors in Department or Unit

Number of Majors	Percent
None	21.3
1-25	15.3
26-50	13.4
50-100	11.9
100-200	11.4
over 200	26.7

TABLE 4. Graduate Majors in Department or Unit

Number of Majors	Percent
None	30.5
1-10	9.5
11-20	7.0
21-50	21.0
51-100	14.5
over 100	17.5

Courses Offered by the Department or Unit. The number of undergraduate and graduate courses offered within the Departments/Units range from 0 to over 100. The mean number of undergraduate courses is 29.5. The mean number of graduate courses offered is 22.2. Over 200 of the respondents (98%) indicated that at least one undergraduate or undergraduate course within their departments or units includes aging content.

The number of undergraduate courses offered in the Department/Units that include aging content range from none to 68. The mean number is 8.4. The number of graduate courses offered in the Department/Units that include aging content range from none to 44. The mean

number of graduate courses with aging content is 8.0. On average, less than 30% of the undergraduate courses offered and less than 40% of the graduate courses offered include content on aging.

Of those courses with aging content offered by the Departments or Units, only an average of 2.5 undergraduate courses and 2.4 graduate courses include elder abuse and neglect as a content area. Of course, students also take courses outside of their own departments or units. The next section examines the extent of elder abuse and neglect course content as part of a program's curriculum.

ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT WITHIN A PROGRAM'S CURRICULUM

The previous section demonstrated that any one department offers very few courses that include elder abuse and neglect as a content area. However, this does not necessarily mean that the student is rarely exposed to elder abuse and neglect course content. A student's educational program includes both courses offered within the student's own department or unit and courses that are part of the program's curriculum, but offered in another department or unit. Thus, a student's major curriculum may include wide exposure to elder abuse and neglect course content, by including a number of required and elective courses across the campus as a whole. Required courses insure that all students within the program are exposed to the course material. Elective courses offer the student a choice as to whether or not to take the course. On another dimension, elder abuse and neglect could comprise the sole or primary course content, or it could be only one segment or component of the course content. Tables 5-8 examine elder abuse and neglect course content along these various dimensions.

Required Courses. The most rigorous way to insure that students receive education in elder abuse and neglect is to have it as the primary or sole content of a required course. In this way, all students within the program would be extensively exposed to the material. The number of required undergraduate courses within a program's curriculum in which elder abuse and neglect is the sole or primary course content ranges from none to two. Similarly, the number of required graduate courses with this as the primary course content ranges from none to five. Approximately 95% of the undergraduate and graduate curriculums include no required courses with primary content in elder abuse and neglect (Table 5).

TABLE 5. Required Courses in Curriculum that Include Elder Abuse and Neglect as the Primary or Sole Course Content

# Courses	Undergraduate Curriculums (%)	Graduate Curriculums (%)
None	94.7	96.1
1-2	3.9	2.6
3-5	0.0	1.3

The second most rigorous way to insure that all students within a program receive at least some exposure to elder abuse and neglect is to have that subject matter be a segment or component of a required course(s) within a curriculum. The number of required courses incorporating at least some content in elder abuse and neglect ranges from 0-10. The range for graduate courses is from 0-8. Nearly half (45%) of all undergraduate curriculums require 1-2 courses that include the topic of elder abuse and neglect. Nearly 60% of all graduate curriculums require students to take from 1-5 courses that include at least some exposure to elder abuse and neglect. Four percent of both undergraduate and graduate curriculums require exposure to this

course material in 6 or more courses (Table 6).

TABLE 6. Required Courses in Curriculum that Include Elder Abuse and Neglect as a Segment or Component of the Course Content

# Courses	Undergraduate Curriculums (%)	Graduate Curriculums (%)
None	28.9	38.2
1-2	44.7	39.4
3-5	22.3	18.4
6-10	3.9	3.9

Elective Courses. Elective courses may or may not be taken by every student in the program. Thus, there is no assurance that all students will be exposed to the content included in elective courses. There are more elective courses that include course content in elder abuse and neglect than there are similar required courses in these curriculums. The number of elective courses in which elder abuse and neglect is the sole or primary course content ranges from 0-10 for both undergraduate and graduate curriculums; however, 88% of the undergraduate and 92% of the graduate curriculums include no such elective courses (Table 7).

There are more elective courses included in these curriculums in which elder abuse and neglect is a segment or component of the course material, than any other type of course. Both undergraduate and graduate curriculums include a range of 0-14 courses in this category. Just over half (51%) of all undergraduate curriculums include 1-2 courses that at least touch upon elder abuse and neglect content. Fifty-eight percent of the graduate curriculums include 1-5 elective courses with some content in elder abuse and neglect (Table 8).

TABLE 7. Elective Courses in Curriculum that Include Elder Abuse and Neglect as the Primary or Sole Course Content

# Courses	Undergraduate Curriculums (%)	Graduate Curriculums(%)
None	88.2	92.1
1-2	6.6	3.9
3-5	3.9	2.6
6-10	1.3	1.3

TABLE 8. Elective Courses in Curriculum that Include Elder Abuse and Neglect as a Segment or Component of the Course Content

# Courses	Undergraduate Curriculums (%)	Graduate Curriculums (%)
None	23.7	31.6
1-2	51.4	42.1
3-5	18.3	15.7
6-8	5.2	9.1
9-14	1.3	1.3

TOPICS IN ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Elder abuse and neglect, as a subject matter area, can encompass many different topics. Previous questions asked respondents whether or not elder abuse and neglect subject matter was included in required or elective courses within their curriculums. However, no definitions or guidelines were given as to what might constitute elder abuse and neglect subject matter. The respondents' own ideas of what topics properly "belong" to this subject matter area could be very different, influencing their responses.

In this section, respondents were given a list of 20 topic areas, and asked whether each topic was covered in elective courses, required courses, courses of both types, or not covered in any courses in their curriculums. These topics, drawn from the research literature and best practice manuals, convey both basic knowledge of elder abuse and neglect as a phenomenon, and information that, if known, should increase both the effectiveness and efficacy of service delivery to abused and neglected elders. Results are shown on Table 9.

At least half of the respondents noted that the history of elder abuse research (66% of respondents), cultural/ethnic characteristics that could affect service needs and delivery of services to vulnerable older adults (52% of respondents), and case assessment (50% of respondents) were topics not included in any course in their curriculums. A relatively high percentage of respondents (46.3%) indicated that such basic, but extremely important, information as victim and abuser profiles were also not covered in any course.

Required Courses. Out of a total of 20 topics, those topics included most frequently in required courses as reported by the respondents are (rank in parenthesis, with 1 denoting the topic included most frequently):

- Neglect (1)
- Attitudes toward aging (2)
- Causes of elder abuse (3)
- Psychological abuse (3)
- Physical abuse (5)

TABLE 9. Coverage of Elder Abuse and Neglect Topics in Courses with Content in Aging

Topic	Not Covered in any Course	Covered in Required Courses	Covered in Elective Courses	Covered in Both Types
History of elder abuse research	66.2%	14.9%	12.9%	6.0%
Cultural/ethnic characteristics that affect service needs and delivery	51.7	23.9	12.9	11.4
Case assessment	49.8	24.9	16.9	8.5
Abuser profile	46.3	25.4	14.4	13.9
Victim profile	46.3	27.9	13.9	11.9
Sexual abuse	42.3	30.8	13.4	13.4
Self-neglect	38.8	35.3	12.4	13.4
Intervention/prevention	37.8	34.3	15.9	11.9
Adult protective services	37.3	35.3	15.4	11.9
Physical health problems	37.3	34.3	12.9	15.4
Institutional elder abuse	36.3	35.3	15.9	12.4
Elder rights	36.3	33.3	13.9	16.4
Ethical dilemmas facing service providers	33.3	33.8	16.4	16.4
Mental health and illness	27.9	38.8	18.4	14.9
Financial exploitation	24.9	36.3	21.4	17.4
Attitudes toward aging	20.4	44.3	13.4	21.9
Causes of elder abuse	18.4	41.8	19.4	20.4
Neglect	18.4	44.8	15.9	20.9
Physical abuse	17.4	41.3	17.9	23.4
Psychological abuse	16.9	41.8	19.9	21.4

Out of a total of 20 topics, those topics included least frequently in required courses as reported by the respondents are (rank in parenthesis, with 20 denoting the topic included least frequently):

- History of elder abuse research (20)
- Cultural/ethnic characteristics affecting service needs and delivery (19)
- Case assessment (18)
- Abuser profile (17)
- Victim profile (16)

Elective Courses. Out of a total of 20 topics, those topics included most frequently in elective courses as reported by the respondents are (rank in parenthesis, with 1 denoting the topic included most frequently):

- Financial exploitation (1)
- Psychological abuse (2)
- Causes of elder abuse (3)
- Mental health and illness (4)
- Physical abuse (5)

Out of a total of 20 topics, those topics included least frequently in elective courses as reported by the respondents are (rank in parenthesis, with 20 denoting the topic included least frequently):

- Self-neglect (20)
- Cultural/ethnic characteristics affecting service needs and delivery (19)
- Physical health problems (19)
- History of elder abuse research (19)
- Sexual abuse (16)
- Attitudes toward aging (16)

Required and Elective Courses. Out of a total of 20 topics, those topics included most frequently in both required and elective courses as reported by the respondents are (rank in parenthesis, with 1 denoting the topic included most frequently):

- Physical abuse (1)
- Attitudes toward aging (2)
- Psychological abuse (3)
- Neglect (4)
- Causes of elder abuse (5)

Out of a total of 20 topics, those topics included least frequently in both required and elective courses as reported by the respondents are (rank in parenthesis, with 20 denoting the topic included least frequently):

- History of elder abuse research (20)
- Case assessment (19)
- Cultural/ethnic characteristics affecting service needs and delivery (18)
- Victim profile (17)
- Intervention/prevention (17)
- Adult protective services (17)

SATISFACTION WITH ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT AS A TOPIC AREA IN AGING PROGRAMS

Having seen the list of possible topic areas in the previous question, thus, becoming more familiar with the types and scope of topics that could be considered appropriate, respondents were asked the degree to which the course content in their Department/Unit courses on aging dealt with elder abuse and neglect (Table 10). More than 50% of the respondents, who had already indicated that their courses included topics in elder abuse and neglect, noted that both their undergraduate and graduate programs, as a whole, had less than 5% content area in elder abuse and neglect. Approximately one-third of the respondents indicated that elder abuse and neglect comprised from 5-10% of the course content in their Department/Unit courses on aging.

TABLE 10. Elder Abuse and Neglect Topics as a Percent of Course Content in all Department/Unit Courses on Aging

Elder Abuse Topics	Undergraduate Courses (%)	Graduate Courses (%)
less than 5%	53.9	53.9
5-10%	35.5	34.2
11-25%	7.9	7.9
26-50%	0.0	3.9
51-75%	0.0	0.0
over 75%	2.0	0.0

Respondents also indicated general satisfaction with this distribution of course material. At the undergraduate level, 65.8% of the respondents indicated that they thought the above percentage inclusions of elder abuse and neglect topic material was just right; 32.9% felt that there was too little and that more content on elder abuse and neglect should be included; and 1.3% believed that there already was too much elder abuse and neglect topic material included in their aging courses.

Results were similar at the graduate level. Of those respondents who indicated that their Department/Unit offered courses on aging, 53.9% felt that their courses already contained an appropriate amount of elder abuse and neglect topic material. More content on elder abuse and neglect was desired by 44.7% of the respondents; and 1.3% indicated that their courses on aging already included too much information on elder abuse and neglect.

While the majority of respondents indicated satisfaction with the amount of material on elder abuse and neglect already a part of their programs, over one-third still felt that greater inclusion would be desirable. Taken with the fact that 92% indicated that elder abuse and neglect should be a part of every aging program, one might hypothesize that academicians in charge of program development might be prone to increase the extremely small percentage of course content currently occupied by abuse and neglect subject matter.

Curriculums, and the courses that comprise those curriculums, are finite, but not unchanging. Academic programs and courses regularly undergo examination. Particularly in the human services, courses and curriculums are, or should be, frequently updated to include those subjects that are seen as most socially relevant and pressing. Therefore, respondents were given a list of four serious problems facing the elderly today, and asked to rank them with #1 being the most

serious problem, and #4 being the least serious problem among those listed (Table 11). Unavailability of affordable long-term care was viewed as the most serious problem. The next most serious problems were deteriorating physical and/or mental health, and poverty. Elder abuse and neglect received the highest mean ranking and, thus, was viewed as the least serious problem.

TABLE 11. Ranking of Serious Problems Facing the Elderly Today by Respondents in Departments/Units with Courses on Aging

Problem	Mean Score	Rank *
Unavailability of affordable long-term care	1.99	1
Deteriorating physical and/or mental health	2.01	2
Poverty	2.75	3
Abuse and neglect	3.22	4
* Rank of 1 = most serious problem Rank of 4 = least serious problem		

Elder abuse and neglect was viewed as the least serious problem facing the elderly by almost a 2-1 margin. Only 5% of the respondents ranked it as the most serious problem facing the elderly. It seems logical to propose that those topics seen as more damaging to the elderly's quality of life will have more emphasis in curriculums established to train future human service professionals. Thus, it would seem unlikely that more attention will be paid to topics in elder abuse and neglect within aging curriculums.

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